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ABSTRACT

This study examined preservice elementary teachers' understandings of the role of caring in educational contexts. Rather than attending to process variables (the teachers' emergent practices), the study focused on presage variables (the teachers' beliefs and understandings) and the teachers' reflections on their classroom experiences. Participants were 17 students in an Elementary Classroom Organization and Management course. Data comprised the weekly dialogue journal responses (via email) assigned as a course requirement. Journal entries revealed several important and commonly held aspects of the student teachers' understandings of caring: essentialism (that caring and teaching are rooted in instinct), oversimplification (for example, centering beliefs about the relationship of teaching and caring in one's own emotions), and romanticism (idealistic descriptions of caring teaching that showcase preservice teachers' optimism and hope for their lives in the profession while simultaneously reflecting their lack of real-world experience in classrooms). The study concluded that these understandings are troubling to teacher educators because they make novice teachers vulnerable to burnout, exhaustion, and perfectionism, but that these preconceptions also offer an ideal starting point for productive, educative dialogue about caring and elementary school teaching practice. (Contains 36 references.) (EV)

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Preservice teachers' understandings of caring

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Caring is widely believed to be a central facet of teaching. Kohl (1984, 66), for example, asserts that "a teacher has an obligation to care about every student;" Rogers & Webb (1991, 174) insist "good teachers care, and good teaching is inextricably linked to specific acts of caring." By extension, the development of an ethic of care is also seen as a central concern of teacher education (Goodlad, Soder & Sirotnik, 1990), and an important aspect of preservice teachers' field placement experiences (Rogers & Webb 1991)—Noddings (1986, 504) writes: "Practice in teaching should be practice in caring... [T]here is an attitude to be sustained and enhanced as well as a set of skills to be learned."

Several recent textbooks have been developed for use in courses aimed at preparing novice teachers to create classrooms and professional identities centered around caring relationships with children. These textbooks—Charney's *Teaching Children to Care* (1992), and Dalton & Watson's *Among Friends: Classrooms where Caring and Learning Prevail* (1997), for example—focus on classroom processes and practices, offering strategies for creating caring communities in classrooms. To use Dunkin and Biddle's (1974) terminology, these texts focus on process variables—teacher behaviors and student behaviors in classroom contexts. Little or no attention is paid to the role of what Dunkin and Biddle refer to as presage variables—teacher background, beliefs, values, experiences and so on—in the development of care-centered teaching practices.

However, preservice teachers do not enter their professional preparation empty-handed. Thanks to the apprenticeship of observation (Lortie 1975), these individuals bring with them images and understandings of teaching that will shape their nascent practices. Preservice teachers begin their teacher education experiences with preconceived, atheoretical ideas of the relationship of teaching and caring, ideas which reverberate throughout the teachers' initial forays into classroom life (McLaughlin 1991; Tabachnik & Zeichner 1984).

In this article we share the results of a recent study of a group of preservice elementary teachers in which we examined the understandings of the role of caring in educational contexts brought by these novices to their first field placement experiences. Rather than attending to process variables—the teachers' emergent practices—we focused upon presage variables—the teachers' beliefs and understandings— and the teachers' reflections on their classroom experiences. As Cole & Knowles's work would suggest (Cole & Knowles 1993), we found that our students' conceptions of the relationship between teaching and caring were underdeveloped and limited. Rather than seeing these partial understandings as problematic or unsophisticated, however, we argue that the student teachers' preconceptions are an ideal starting point for productive, educative dialogue about caring and elementary school teaching practice.

Caring and teaching

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Generally, when educators write about caring, their understanding of the term is rooted in the work of Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984). For these scholars, caring involves the establishment of meaningful relationships, the ability to sustain connections, and the commitment to respond to others with sensitivity and flexibility. When this work is applied to the practices of classroom teaching, caring takes the shape of encouraging dialogue, exhibiting sensitivity to students' needs and interests, and providing engaging, rich and meaningful materials and activities (Rogers & Webb 1991), among other responsive pedagogical strategies. Caring can be a basis for teachers' decision making (Noddings 1992). A classroom environment rooted in a commitment to caring is seen to build an atmosphere of trust that enables students to take risks (McDermott, 1977) and to develop their self-esteem (Charney 1992).

Though much of the literature centers on the benefits accruing to children in caring classroom environments, caring pedagogical relationships also benefit teachers. Lortie found caring relationships with students to be a significant source of professional satisfaction for teachers, one of the "psychic rewards" of a career in education (Lortie 1975, 104). Nias (1989) and Hargreaves (1994) both present overwhelming evidence indicating that teachers found the opportunity to be deeply and personally involved with children both satisfying and beneficial; one teacher highlighted the mutuality of the student-teacher relationship by saying, "Don't think I'm the one who's doing all the giving. . . . I know that by the end of the day several people will have shown that they love me" (Nias 1989, 87). Similarly, Hargreaves (1994) notes that many teachers elected to enter the profession because of a strong commitment to caring for children and considered caring relationships with children to be a significant source of job satisfaction throughout their careers.

However, a commitment to caring can also become a source of difficulty for teachers. As Robin Leavitt (1994) points out, at times even the most committed teacher's capacities for ongoing caregiving are exhausted due to the inherently unequal nature of a caring teacher-student relationship. The child's understandably limited ability to contribute to the maintenance and sustenance of this caring relation can lead to emotional strain, anger, and alienation for the teacher. When teachers become burdened in this way, their caring feelings are transformed into "emotional labor—the publicly observable management of feelings sold for a wage" (Leavitt 1994, 61).

Even under ideal circumstances, caring for students can be demanding and exasperating. Sandra Acker (In press, 10) describes the frazzled state of a primary teacher after a particularly long day: "She loves the class, she says, though she could tear her hair out." Because of strong feelings of commitment and responsibility, teachers invest enormous amounts of time and energy in their caring relations with their students (Nias 1989; Hargreaves 1994). Prone to perfectionism, many caring teachers face feelings of frustration and guilt when they are unable to meet fully all the needs of their students (Hargreaves 1994), thereby making themselves vulnerable to professional burn-out.

Though caring is a term widely-used by educators and educational theorists and researchers, the range of meanings attached to "caring" is frequently underexplored and under-discussed. Rogers & Webb exemplify this problem when they state "our knowledge of caring is tacit; it is implicit in action. In other words, although we have difficulty defining it, we know it when we see it" (Rogers & Webb 1991, 177). Looking from a standpoint of teacher education, we find this stance troubling. Assuming that preservice teachers "know [caring] when they see it" leaves too much to chance.

Preservice teachers do enter their professional preparation with tacit definitions of caring and with a range of ideas and beliefs about the ways that caring will play out in their teaching lives. These ideas have developed over the course of the students' experiences in a range of teaching-learning situations. A large body of research on teacher beliefs indicates that these ideas will be a strong influence on the student teachers' understandings

of and experiences in their classroom placements (Bullough 1991; Cole & Knowles 1993; Dunkin, Precians & Nettle 1994; Hollingsworth 1989; Kagan 1992).

The students' preconceived understandings of the relationship between caring and teaching are likely to be strongly-held and fairly stable (Kagan 1992). However, as Cole & Knowles (1993) point out, these preconceptions were formed based on limited experience and understanding of realities of teaching, and as a result are inadequate, partial, and disconnected from the particularites of actual classroom practices. Unfortunately, these unarticulated and unexamined understandings of caring that preservice teachers bring to their first professional experiences will mold these teachers' practices and shape their emerging images of themselves as educators.

Because of this, teacher educators "should come to understand the incoming beliefs of [their] students" (Hollingsworth 1989, 161), attend carefully to those beliefs, and endeavor to build on them in productive ways (Bullough 1991). Given the widespread interest in incorporating caring into the curricula of teacher education, we feel it necessary to explore the baseline understandings preservice teachers hold about the connection of caring and teaching. Doing so will enable us to develop teacher education strategies that will prepare novice teachers to draw upon the pedagogical power of caring and to avoid succumbing to the burn-out and exhaustion that can accompany a commitment to caring teaching.

In the Spring of 1998, a cohort of seventeen undergraduates and two post-baccalaureate students were enrolled in our Elementary Classroom Organization and Management course at a large research university in the Southwestern United States. Lisa was the course instructor, Vickie the fieldwork supervisor. This course is a central requirement for the students' professional development sequence, and provides the cohort students with their first long-term fieldwork placement.[1] The course met weekly, and covered topics such as classroom environments, discipline, lesson and unit planning, professionalism, and so on. The students were aware of our focus on and commitment to the development of caring teachers and the creation of caring classrooms.

In order to facilitate and support reflection, dialogue journals were an integral part of the structure of this course (McIntyre & Tlusty 1995). Each student in the class reflected and wrote on topics related to the role of caring in their classroom experiences. Lisa, the course instructor, responded to each student's writing individually; each student was thereby encouraged to explore and respond to the theme of caring in classrooms in a way that furthered his/her individual growth as a professional and deepened his/her thinking on the role of relationships in teaching.

These weekly writings were exchanged between Lisa and each student via electronic mail, and were hence named "ejournals." We opted for electronic dialogue journals for several reasons. First, the preservice teacher education students at our university are expected to develop their technological literacy; every course is expected to have some technology component[2]. Second, we believed that the email format would provide students with a less formal, more spontaneous medium than traditional notebook-style journals, thereby eliminating some of the pressure and drudgery often associated with reflective journal writing (Maas 1991). Email journals also allowed the course instructor to respond quickly to the students' writings; the ejournals became a way for students to get feedback on pressing classroom issues in a timely manner.

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[1]In this placement, students spend 20 hours per week in an elementary classroom (grades 1-5) in a socio- culturally diverse urban school district for a period of 10 weeks. In the following semester, the students engage in their formal student teaching work.

[2]In addition to the ejournals, we also used email as a regular form of communication with students in the class. Further, we created a class listserv that allowed all members of the cohort—students, supervisor, course instructors, and faculty coordinators—to communicate easily with the group as a whole.

Participation in this study of caring was open to all students in the class; data comprised the weekly dialogue journal responses assigned as a course requirement. All students in the cohort wrote these ejournal responses; only those 17 students who elected to participate in the study—16 female and one male, representing a range of ethnicities including Anglo, Asian, and Hispanic—had their responses considered as data for this project[3]. The data were independently read and coded by Vickie and Lisa; they were analyzed horizontally, by looking at each individual student's writing across the semester, and vertically, by looking at the week-by-week gestalt of the cohort as a whole. Themes which emerged in both Vickie's and Lisa's analyses were highlighted, explored in greater depth, and interpreted. These key themes will be the focus of this paper.

Beliefs about caring and teaching

In the students' ejournal considerations of caring, sloganeering occasionally stood in place of genuine insight. For Ariel, "a caring teacher is one who is truly devoted to improving and educating fellow members of the human race" (mel.1), whereas Andi notes "I care for every child because I know they hold the future for us." (mic.1) The students had only just begun their field placements when they wrote these first reflections; they drew on idealized images of teaching they'd developed over the years rather than on real experience with children in classrooms.

For most of the students, caring and teaching were inextricably linked. It was difficult for some of them to separate the two constructs. Because they conflated caring and teaching, the students were predisposed to see evidence of caring in their cooperating teachers' practices. Many of the students had little difficulty; their ejournals were rich with stories of relationships attended to and nourished through caring teaching. However, some of the students were not so fortunate, spending field placement time in classrooms where slow children were given nicknames like "Flash" (deb.1) or "the human lump" (cou.6), and where teachers consciously decided not to allow themselves to get attached to the children (dav.5).

Even when faced with practices that appeared to demonstrate a marked absence of caring, however, the students worked hard to find ways to see those practices as examples of caring teaching. For example, Rosita writes:

> The environment was cluttered and there were posters that were falling down, I took this to be some form of caring. . . . The relationship between teacher and student was interesting. I never saw her hug a child, or say good morning. She put children in time out quite often.... I have looked very hard for the caring relationship between teacher and student, it must be what they call tough love. I know she cares for her students, I need to figure it out for myself. (Car. 1)

And Maria writes:

> All week long as I pondered over this e-journal, I asked myself... "Is Ms. Ziffle a caring teacher?" At first, I told myself "no" but them as I thought about what "caring" exactly meant, I told myself "Yes, she is a caring teacher...."
>
> Before observing Ms. Ziffle, I thought a caring teacher was one who is kind, loving, patient and one who never raises his/her voice at the

[3]Students were assured that their decision to participate or to abstain from participation in this study would not affect their workload for the course, their grade, our evaluation of their work, or their future relationships with the university.

> students. Now, I am sure this type of teacher exists and is successful in educating his/her students, but at a school like Green Oaks [a low SES school with a student population composed of Hispanic and African American children], this type of teacher would not be in control of his/her class. . . .
>
> I feel Ms. Ziffle recognizes this dilemma and has more respect for her children than to place them in this type of situation. That is why I feel her combination of instilling strict discipline and having a special love towards them at the same time makes her a caring teacher. My understanding of a caring teacher is now broader. (Ton.1)

Though it clearly caused some cognitive dissonance for the students—particularly the two quoted here—no one was willing to question the automatic connection of teaching and caring or to interrogate the underlying assumptions of their cooperating teachers' practices.

At the start of the semester, Kay wrote: "One of my initial reasons for wanting to become a teacher is because I care so much about children. I absolutely love them!" (mar.1). Echoing this sentiment, Leigh wrote, "Caring is a characteristic that I think all students who want to be teachers possess. It comes easy for them." (bre.1). These entries capture several important and commonly-held aspects of the student teachers' understandings of caring: essentialism, oversimplification, and romanticism.

Essentialism

A surprisingly large number of the student teachers in our cohort believed that both caring and teaching are rooted in instinct. Discussing caring, Andi asserted, "I think that caring for a student comes naturally." (mic.1) and Mary stated, "I think a caring teacher cares for each child as a student and as a person. When the caring is genuine, it is as natural as it should be" (cel.2). When considering teaching, Roberta confessed "When I first started teaching, I thought I was meant to be a teacher. I had always worked well with students, and I thought that I had a gift." (cou.10).

That caring is considered an essentialist trait is not surprising; many widely held and long-standing notions such as maternal instinct and motherly love indicate the prevalence of this belief system (Thurer 1991). What is surprising, though, is that students in a teacher education program could be so strongly committed to an essentialist viewpoint on teaching. Given that their degree program has been specifically designed to teach people to become teachers and to support them in the process, it seems that the students would think of teaching as a skill or an art that can be taught and learned, and not a gift or a personality trait. But the belief that being a teacher is "natural" was pervasive among our students. In fact, halfway through her field placement experience, Roberta experienced a professional and personal crisis directly caused by this belief. She wrote:

> Over the past month, maybe a little less, I thought that I was not cut out to be a teacher. I thought that I did not have enough of the qualities to be a good teacher. . . . As you might expect, my parents freaked out. And that is putting it lightly, very. They were right, I have always wanted to be a teacher as long as I can remember. I have always adored children and I have a great rapport with them. Just recently I have doubted everything in myself and really struggled to find what it takes to teach. (Cou.6)

Roberta got stuck in a trap set by an essentialist understanding of teaching: being a teacher is a natural instinct, and either you have it or you don't. And, since teaching is natural, then it should be easy. If you are working hard at it, or if you feel like you're failing at it, then you probably don't have that natural instinct and should get out of the profession.

Barbie avoided Roberta's trap by successfully balancing strongly held essentialist beliefs—"I have always thought it was just something natural that God had given me, a talent for working with kids"— with an understanding of the role of hard work in becoming a caring teacher—"Then I realized that you have to refine that talent to be able to teach those children." (deb.10) This belief that time and effort are central requirements of caring teaching ran counter to the essentialist position, and was shared by several of the students:

> If you put time, effort, and some caring into it, students can definitely benefit. (mic.6)

> I think that a teacher that is willing to put that much time and effort to make sure that her students are learning, yet having fun in the process, exemplifies a caring teacher. (deb.7)

> A caring teacher has many facets. A caring teacher will take time to show his/her students this by engaging themselves in the students' lives. . . . The teacher makes a valiant effort to understand their students and show their interest in them individually. (dar.1)

Just as these students balanced their essentialist beliefs with an awareness of the value of hard work, Ariel balanced her essentialist beliefs about being a caring teacher with an almost existential understanding of the power of commitment and choice, writing:

> If I did not care about my students' retention, comprehension, or enjoyment, teaching would be simple. I could look at the state curriculum, pass out worksheets, assign textbook pages, grade [them], and send them on their way. However, there is something deep inside me that will not let me. Call it my conscience, my heart, my instinct, or my nature. All of these add up to form a tremendous commitment to my students. (mel.3)

Ariel's emphatic insistence on thinking about what she is doing with her students and taking responsibility for their experiences evokes Maxine Greene's (1973) views on teaching:

> As people concerned with education, we are inescapably caught up in the pursuit of the worthwhile.... We can easily say that we are assigned to teach our students to learn how to think intelligently and critically, to realize their potential, to appreciate everwidening areas of experience. We can easily say that we want to help students develop desirable states of mind. But everyone who teaches knows that such general declarations have little meaning in the day-to-day life of the classroom. The teacher is concerned with specific actions, concrete decisions. Functioning intentionally with particular children in particular situations, he has to decide what to do to focus on worthwhile achievement. (p. 220)

Roberta, too, spoke to the issues of commitment and consciousness in caring teaching, realizing "that we need to be very aware of the power we hold over these children." She went on to assert:

> Each time a teacher speaks to or with a child, part of a relationship is built. A teacher has to be very conscious about what she is saying at all times. A teacher can break down a child's confidence. On the other hand, a teacher can take this opportunity to show how much she cares for the child. (cou.3)

Echoing Maxine Greene's call for a sense of "wide-awakeness" (Greene 1978, 42) in teaching, Roberta insisted that caring teachers must remember their obligation to maintain an engaged awareness of their relationships with and responsibility to the children in their classrooms. This stance contradicts—or perhaps balances—Roberta's strong essentialist beliefs discussed previously.

The tensions and contradications within Roberta's conceptions of teaching are not surprising. Teaching is a rich and complicated undertaking; even experienced teachers find contradiction, tension, and inconsistency to be an inescapable facet of their work (Ayers 1993). Furthermore, for our students this first fieldwork placement is a time of transition; they are transforming themselves from college kids to elementary school teachers. The apparent disjuncture between Roberta's sophisticated understandings of caring teaching and her simple essentialist beliefs about the natural instincts contributing to both caring and teaching may be an inevitable by-product of this transition.

Oversimplification

Because the image of the caring teacher is so prevalent in our culture, it was easy for the students to fall into overly simple understandings of what it meant to teach with care. Roberta exemplifies this phenomenon, writing "A caring teacher has to have love, love, and more love for children" (cou.1).

This type of sentiment occurred frequently in the students' ejournal entries, particularly early in their field placements. Like Roberta, many students focused on the personal, centering their beliefs about the relationship of teaching and caring in their emotions. The tendency to view caring as a personality trait, one necessary to be a good teacher, is common among teachers (Nias 1989). Other students focused on the global, emphasizing the contribution of caring teaching not only to the children involved, but to the world in general. An example of this perspective comes from Mary's ejournal: "My goal is to care for all children for the special individuals they are and for what they have to share with the world" (cel.1).

Along similar lines, for many of the students caring meant being nice. Maria asserted that "a caring teacher was one who is kind, loving, patient and one who never raises his/her voice at the students" (ton.1). Kay chose teaching as her profession because of the opportunities it appeared to provide for engaging in nice interactions: "I decided I wanted to be an elementary school teacher because, at that age, most—if not all—of the kids love their teacher. I do not think I could deal with a classroom full of students who did not like me." (mar.1). Barbie wrote:

> I've learned that caring doesn't mean that you are nice to someone just for the sake of being nice. I've learned that caring is also being hard on someone because you know that they can do better, or challenging someone because you want them to learn. Caring involves truly wanting them to succeed. (deb.1)

Barbie rejects the idea of caring as being nice—the initial understanding of caring she brought with her to her fieldwork—in favor of a more sophisticated and mature notion of caring.

Due in part to portrayals of teachers in popular culture (Freedman, in press; Joseph & Burnaford 1994; Weber & Mitchell 1995) and in part to deeply engrained and gendered stereotypes of elementary school teaching as women's work (Biklen 1992; Freedman 1990), teaching appears inextricably linked with a particular constellation of affective traits. Beth Swadener (1992) coined the term "the hegemony of nice" to describe this phenomenon; the term captures the strength and breadth of the belief that elementary teachers are nice, friendly, warm, kind, gentle and so on (Nias 1989). This linkage of

teaching and "nice" posed problems for the students as they wrestled with their emerging professional identities.

Devry wonders "if students ultimately respond better to a compassionate, fun teacher compared to a stiff, demanding one?" (dar.6), and Barbie believes "there is a huge difference between being an unbiased professional and a caring teacher. It is very hard to know the correct time to assume each role" (deb.4). Though some students struggled to find a balancing point, these assertions indicate that these students had drawn a line in the sand: as a teacher one is either professional, unbiased, and unfeeling OR compassionate, fun, and caring. The students' tendency toward oversimplification is evident in this desire to reduce a complex, organic, professional stance into a menu from which you can choose either column A or column B.

Other students highlighted one particular aspect of being nice, considering service and helping to be central features of caring teaching. Leigh stated:

> Caring can be shown in the classroom in a variety of ways and I will mention a few that I have seen this week. Getting a bag for a student who has lost a tooth, delegating roles for students to be for the day, allowing students to make choices for certain activities, calling on students who do not have their hands raised and helping them along with the problem . . . and not being upset that you cannot get any work done at your desk because students are continually coming up to you with tons of questions. (bre.1)

Echoing Leigh's beliefs, Thuy wrote: "An educator must take pleasure in dedicating his or her life to serving children." (gia.1) The deep connection of teaching to stereotypically feminine behaviors and stereotypes is obvious in these statements. Eager to please and eager to succeed, the students exhibited a tendency to play it safe, rarely straying from the well known understandings and images of the "typical" elementary school teacher.

Romanticism

The students' initial journal entries were overflowing with idealistic descriptions of caring teaching showcasing their optimism and hope for their lives in the profession, while simultaneously reflecting their lack of real-world experience in classrooms. Patience, devotion, and love feature prominently in these early entries. For example, Roberta wrote:

> I know what kind of caring teacher I want to be. I want to have an endless, deep love for children that lasts through the years. I do not want it to diminish as I get older. Also, I want to be very patient with everyone, even the most difficult child. (cou.1)

These idealized, romantic notions were clearly rooted in the students' aspirations and images of the teachers they hoped to become. Some of the students painted detailed portraits of their future selves in their ejournal entries, each with a different emphasis or focus. Mark, for example, centered his image of an ideal teacher on affective issues when he wrote:

> A caring teacher . . . . would be one to care about the children's personal life and interests. This teacher should be available for the child in any capacity and should never turn a deaf ear on a child's problem or concern. He or she should also help the child meet his or her potential in all areas of school and help them refine/understand their personal interests. A caring teacher should be quick to praise and never ridicule a student in front of others. Discipline should be fair and enforced in a timely manner. Caring

encompasses a wide range of activities and should never be forgotten or dismissed. (dav.7)

Ariel, on the other hand, centered her description on pedagogical issues:

> Teachers who care want their students to enjoy learning. Caring means going to great lengths to create lesson plans, find manipulatives, learn individual styles and try to make stations for the different types [of students]. Caring means specifically tailoring assignments to individual classes, taking time to assess each student, staying late to tutor. Caring in teaching practices is scrapping a magnificent unit for the class that does not understand or does not enjoy it and starting fresh. (mel. 3)

Each student equated caring with his or her personal standards of good teaching practices. This was almost invisible to us because the majority of the students' held a shared set of beliefs and values about what would constitute "good teaching." This stance, evident in Mark's and Ariel's ejournal entries quoted above, was in all likelihood a product of the students' shared experiences moving through their education and methods coursework as a cohort—all the students heard the same things from the same sources.

One student departed from this stance. Thuy, a Vietnamese immigrant, had spent a great deal of time volunteering in the small Vietnamese language newcomers' program in a local school district and hoped to teach there once she received her credential. Her definition of a caring teacher, forged and rooted in this specific context rather than in the context of her university coursework, was significantly different from that of her classmates. However, like those of the other student teachers, it painted a portrait of the type of teacher she hoped to become:

> I believe the students in Mrs. Broadway's class know that I truly care about them through the following descriptions. First, I am always excited and care very much to be at school to help them. Every morning I check their homework for correct completion. When the assignment is properly done, they receive stickers for their work. If a child turns in an incomplete assignment, I call the kid up and demonstrate an example correctly. Then the child is to finish the work at his or her desk. Once the child competes the assignment, a sticker is give to him or her. The reward is to let them know I care about their work and to encourage them to succeed. (gia.4)

Thuy and many of her cohort classmates had been dreaming of a teaching career since they were elementary school children themselves, and were finally seeing that dream come to fruition. Their idealistic and romantic notions about teaching and caring are rooted in these dreams.

At this point in their professional preparation, the students were hesitant to push their thinking on caring and its role in teaching. Within the context of our course, we attempted to explore more sophisticated conceptions of caring: Noddings's (1984) idea that caring is a moral choice and an intellectual act rather than a personality trait, Goldstein's (in press) notion that caring relationships play a central role in children's cognitive growth and should be thought of as more than just a vehicle for enhancing children's self-esteem and for enabling pleasant exchanges in the classroom. Just as Kagan (1992) found, our efforts and the ideas we offered appeared to have little impact on the students' thinking or their practices. Saddled with a demanding courseload and overwhelmed by the enormous responsibility that accompanies being accountable to children in a classroom setting, the students were content to hold onto their dream-like images of caring teaching.

We did not expect our students to hold deeply sophisticated or complex understandings of the interaction of caring and teaching when they entered our course.

These students were beginning their first field placements, and many of them had little first-hand experience with youngsters in any kind of educational setting. We were neither disappointed in nor troubled by their beliefs about caring—though their understandings were partial and underdeveloped, they were appropriate and reasonable within these given circumstances.

However, the understandings and beliefs held by the student teachers in this study—characterized by oversimplification, essentialism, and romanticism—are troubling to us as teacher educators, because they make these novice teachers vulnerable to the problems linked to unquestioning and unexamined acceptance of the simple "teachers are caring" stance: burnout, exhaustion, perfectionism, and so on (Acker, in press; Hargreaves 1994; Leavitt 1994; Nias 1989). Further, given the evidence highlighting the "central role played by preexisting beliefs/images and prior experience" (Kagan 1992, 140) in the development of teachers' practices and "the stability and inflexibility of prior beliefs and images" (Kagan 1992, 140) during preservice teachers' training and induction, these worrisome ideas about caring and teaching are unlikely to change and evolve naturally over time.

Dunkin, Precians & Nettle (1994) assert, however, that properly designed teacher education programs can challenge and change this robust knowledge base of prior knowledge and preexisting beliefs. This study offers insight into preservice teachers' understandings of caring; with this knowledge teacher educators can address misconceptions or under-developed understandings and can work to develop methods and strategies which will support the development of a richer and fuller view of the role of caring in teaching.

All of our student teachers believed caring to be an important part of their teaching lives. Their idealistic, romantic and oversimplified beliefs about the relationship between teaching and caring are a powerful starting point for productive and educative dialogue; in our role as teacher educators we need to build on these understandings. Our next steps will be to challenge, to enhance, to question, to complicate, and to interrogate these understandings, and to support these novices in developing understandings of the role of caring in classroom life that will sustain and enhance their work as teachers.

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